Joseph Black

published only three papers on chemical subjects in the course of over fifty years of scientific research, but his work is of such importance that he is regarded as one of the founders of modern chemistry. The most important of his papers, published in 1756 and entitled "Experiments upon Magnesia Alba, Quicklime and some other Alcaline Substances", deals with the chemical changes which occur when quicklime is added to the "mild alkalis" to render them caustic. He showed that when a solution of mild alkali is treated with quicklime, limestone and caustic alkali are produced. Black's explanation of this reaction is still accepted, and so well reasoned is his paper on the subject that it is regarded as one of the classics of chemical literature.

Born in 1728 in Bordeaux of Scottish parents temporarily resident in France, Joseph Black went to Glasgow University at the age of 18, becoming Professor of Anatomy and Chemistry in 1756, a post he retained for ten years until he took up an appointment at the University of Edinburgh. But it is for his work on the alkalis that this Scottish chemist is remembered. These chemicals which include such everyday substances as washing soda and bicarbonate of soda, are as essential for industry as for the home. Their manufacture is one of the most important branches of the British chemical industry.

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